

Literary Analysis Essays:

The difference between a summary and an analysis

We all remember elementary school book reports. Our teachers would assign us a book, we had to read it and then write a paper about what happened in the story to bring to school and prove that we did the reading. We all got used to this, and it became comfortable. Read, write an overview of the story, and get an “A” on the assignment. BUT THEN...college happened.

In literature classes in college, your professors still assign (and expect you to do) the reading, and they still quiz you on it and ask you to write papers. You write the same type of paper that you always have, but you get back a failing grade. Why? It could be because your professor is asking for a literary analysis, but you turned in a summary. In college, your professors expect you to do the reading; they don't want basic proof that you read, remember, and can regurgitate the plot. They want something more. They want you to think critically about what happened and what the author meant when creating this work of art (the written word is a form of art!). You might be asking, “Well what is the difference between a summary and an analysis? How can I tell when I am doing one and not the other?” Well, you are about to find out!

- ❖ Summary: First, let's look at the definition of summary. Merriam-Webster defines “summary” as “using few words to give the most important information about something.” Think of a summary as SparkNotes. It gives you the general gist of what happens in a story, but it's just a plot overview. SparkNotes (and summarizing in general) tend to be poison to a college literature essay. A summary only hits the high points, like when ESPN highlights a sporting event. What we need when we do analysis is the actual Super Bowl, not just the recap. Including short summaries in a literary paper is necessary, but you don't want them to make up the bulk of your paper. Remember, be brief!

Here's an example of a summary without any analysis:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone is a tale about a young orphan boy who lives with his unpleasant aunt, uncle, and cousin. They are so mean to him that they make him live in a cupboard under the stairs instead of giving him an actual bedroom. One day, Harry receives a letter in the mail that tells him that he has been accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Of course, Harry's aunt and uncle won't let him go, but soon the groundskeeper of Hogwarts, Hagrid, shows up and forces them to agree. As soon as September hits, Harry is off to school where he enters a fantastical world of magic and adventure...along with some hidden dangers no one could expect (Rowling).

- ❖ Analysis: The Merriam-Webster definition of “analysis” is: “a careful study of something to learn about its parts, what they do, and how they are related to each other. An

explanation of the nature and meaning of something.” An analysis is a deeper look into the story. All authors make specific choices regarding the structure of their story, the actions of their characters, the setting of the plot, and numerous other details which relate back to the overall themes and messages included therein. In short, when you analyze a story, you are an investigator trying to discover the reason behind all aspects of the work. Teachers assign this type of paper because they want you to develop **critical thinking skills**, which go beyond being able to regurgitate information. These skills will help you become more comfortable forming your own thoughts and opinions, and hone your ability to support those thoughts and opinions in a logical, structured way.

Here is a brief example of an analysis of the same story summarized above:

J.K. Rowling’s first novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, is a thrilling tale of a young boy struggling to find his place in the world. The story’s protagonist, Harry Potter, begins as an abused orphan with no friends and a family who despises him. In this way, Harry is an underdog character, one who any young child who has felt alone can relate to. Harry’s fortunes soon change as his true, magical self comes to light, and he enters the world of his parents, the world where he always belonged. However, Rowling shows us that discovering your true self does not mean that you will no longer encounter hardship. Harry faces multiple trials at his new school, and comes face to face with the ultimate source of evil who he alone can defeat. This ultimate source of evil, Lord Voldemort, and his followers believe only “pure-blood” wizards and witches should be allowed to practice magic. This is reminiscent of real evil people in history (such as Adolf Hitler) who have committed genocide in the name of “racial purity.” Harry overcomes these challenges, defeats Lord Voldemort, and realizes that love and friendship are truly the most powerful magic of all.

As you can see, the second example gives some background on the story, but it uses this background to examine and draw conclusions based on different aspects of the story (the character of Harry, the discovery of “self,” Voldemort’s motivation, etc.) Keep this rule in mind:

***A literary analysis essay should be about 10% summary and 90% analysis. ***

- For more tips and terminology to use while writing your literary analysis, please check out our Literary Devices handout!